

Chicago's Sausage King sizzles his wife

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Adolph was the king: King Luetgert, the King of Sausages. He even looked the role. A large man, broad and stocky, he commanded the respect of all those with whom he came in contact, not only for his foreboding physical appearance but for his business acumen.

He was, after all, the preeminent maker of a scrumptious item that the population of Chicago could not get enough of. His factory commanded the street.

In many ways, Luetgert was the epitome of the successful immigrant experience. Born in Germany in 1845, he came to America 24 years later with only \$30 in his pocket. He settled in Chicago and worked a variety of jobs, always saving and always moving his way up.

In contrast to his flourishing businesses, his personal life was marked by tragedy. His first wife and one of their two young children died at a young age. Within two months, in 1878, he re-married, this time to the slightly built but attractive Louise Bicknese, who had also emigrated from Germany. They had four children, two of whom also, sadly, died in infancy.

After another change of scenery and job, Luetgert had amassed enough money, credit and knowledge to open his grand sausage factory, borrowing \$50,000 to build it.

With the opening of the World's Fair in 1893, business was booming, masking a recession that had gripped the nation. When



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the fair closed, the hidden recession burst out, its effect vicious. Luetgert, like all businessmen, felt the wallop. Unable to pay the bank, he unsuccessfully sought investors.

The factory was shuttered in part and most of the employees let go. Louise, who never wanted to buy the property in the first place, loudly vented her frustration with the turn of events.

The arguments grew worse, Louise now also angry at the attentions her husband paid various women.

And then came yet another illness to one of their children. Now, 5-year-old Elmer was ill. Louise was being nudged closer to the edge, acting odder and odder. On the final days of April 1897, between crying and laughing fits, she told various people of her despair and her need to just leave, to get out of the cage of the king and Chicago.

Louise was last seen late in the evening of May 1. After her disappearance, Adolph Luetgert seemed singularly nonchalant, being far more concerned with the impending foreclosure of his factory.

When Louise's brother Diedrich reported her missing, a manhunt was launched. The big tip came two weeks later when Frank Bialk told of the highly suspicious actions of his boss, Luetgert. Bialk described how he and another employee were ordered to haul two heavy barrels of caustic potash to the boiler room and empty the acid-like contents into the large middle vat, which was then uncharacteristically fired up and kept boiling throughout the night. He said he saw a woman resembling Louise enter the factory late that night with Luetgert.

With their focus narrowing, the police traveled to the factory. Once inside, they went to the vat, which contained a foul-

smelling brownish-red liquid. The vat was drained, revealing at the bottom a sticky mess, peppered by tiny bits of bone, an upper false tooth and two rings. One of the rings contained the initials "L.L." Louise Luetgert.

The police had their man.

The first trial lasted months, with over 100 witnesses called. The prosecution explored the volatile relationship between the couple while its experts testified to the pea-like remains that belonged to a female. A dentist even favorably tied the false tooth to Louise. Most damning, though, was the L.L. ring.

The defense countered with its own experts, who opined that it was impossible to discern anything from the traces recovered and that Mrs. Luetgert had a mental imbalance and had merely run away. They called people who claimed to have seen her in various locales.

As for the ring, the defense argued that the police had planted it there, living up to their well-known shady reputation.

The trial became a media sensation, covered throughout the nation. Hundreds fought to see it in person, with the atmosphere resembling more an unruly mob than an orderly court proceeding.

For his part, Luetgert often appeared disinterested. Meanwhile, the sale of his specialty plummeted, the rumor being that Luetgert

not only murdered his wife, but that he stuffed her remains in his sausages.

After six days of closing arguments, the jurors deliberated. Unbeknownst to them, a reporter, lowered 150 feet down a narrow shaft, eavesdropped and reported what he heard. It thus came as little surprise when the jury publicly stated what it had privately decided: It could not reach a verdict. A mistrial was declared.

A do-over. With one glaring difference: Luetgert's talented lead attorney withdrew from the case and was replaced by one far less competent.

This time Luetgert was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. He lasted 14 months, dying of heart disease. He maintained his innocence to the end.

Louise was never seen again.

Epilogue

In 1904, a major fire destroyed the inside of the Luetgert sausage factory. Over time, it was reported that the entire building had been destroyed. It wasn't.

Today, it houses upscale condominiums whose residents have no clue that they are living in the very same building in which the Sausage King unceremoniously sizzled his unsuspecting wife.

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